**How does one treat theological minorities in the Church? (1999)**
By Paul Victor Marshall (1947-2024)
Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Bethlehem, 1996-2013

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To the clergy of Bethlehem

Dear Colleagues,

How does one treat theological minorities in the Church?

In the past few days, two bishops have declared themselves out of communion with other bishops of our Church. Another bishop is withholding aid to brothers and sisters in Africa because he disagrees with the way their bishop voted at Lambeth. I find these actions, one each from the left and the right, to be extreme, and in neither case do I think the persons involved have considered all the theological and ecclesial implications of their actions.

In response to this increasing polarization, I am taking several actions that I want you to know about in advance. They come from my asking myself what do I and others who support the ordination of women, liturgical reform, and a number of the other changes which have occurred in the Episcopal Church owe to those on the right whom church leaders may have, for whatever reason, offended? *I cannot and will not indulge myself in the presumption of confessing the faults of the "other side,"* so there is nothing here about what gestures I think that people of other points of view ought to make toward people like me and many of you. It is my own conscience and the responsibilities of my office that weigh on me.

FIRST, regarding General Convention in Denver. I think I may claim to know something about liturgical history, and thus feel comfortable observing that in the American church, no prayer book was ever imposed as harshly as the 1979 book was imposed in some places. The result has been the loss of some Episcopalians and the wounding of a substantial number of others. It is important to recognize the historical fact that in church and state, the majority has always had to contend with the temptation to totalitarianism.

Consequently, if I can get the required number of bishops as co-sponsors, I will try to bring to the floor of the 2000 General Convention legislation that will add to our long list of corporate apologies one to those who have been alienated or whose faith has been injured by any insensitivity in imposing the prayer book of 1979. (That there are those who suffer because of sexist, racist and classist language in the church is clear to me, but again, that is not the point of this document.) It is very much more than appropriate that this legislation begin in the House of Bishops.

Similarly, if I cannot accomplish it in the Liturgical Commission, I will try to get on the floor of Convention legislation requiring that "supplemental liturgical material" include

the 1928 prayer book. If that fails, I will seek to begin in 2003 the process of constitutional modification that will permit the use of any prayer book adopted by this Church since its first book of 1789.

SECOND, regarding the particular ministry of the Diocese of Bethlehem to the Episcopal Church.

We like to consider our diocese "community-based, not issue-driven," and I think that history bears out that self-assessment. I therefore have decided to share the hospitality and openness that we enjoy with those who consider themselves marginalized by changes that have taken place in the Church. You know that I do not qualify for membership in the Episcopal Synod of America. However, without reservation, I regard them as sisters and brothers in Christ, fully members of the Episcopal Church, who have more in common with me than otherwise. They are not to be patronized as backward or unenlightened: Convention has made it clear that the positions they hold are to be protected as legitimate theological stands. I have accordingly given permission to two bishops associated with ESA to enter this diocese to preach and celebrate the sacraments at any time. I understand myself to be creating something like a "city of refuge" for those who, for whatever reason, find it desirable to worship with like-minded bishops, just as Bethlehem is already a safe place for people of other points of view.

It is important for me to make sure that you know that no person or organization solicited me on this matter, but that the offer came from my own reflection, prayer and struggle to be faithful to the gospel of Christ.

It is possible that people from several neighboring dioceses would attend events at which these ESA bishops preside. However, my action will most directly affect the Diocese of Pennsylvania, where a long-standing dispute between some ESA parishes and the diocesan leadership has come to a kind of impasse now that the "flying bishops" are no longer permitted in Pennsylvania. I can take absolutely no public position on the rights and wrongs of the positions and strategies adopted by the Bishop of Pennsylvania and the rectors and vestries of the ESA parishes, as I may be called upon to help adjudicate it. I have nonetheless struggled in my own conscience with the plight of those people, particularly children, who have no power in this situation, and who are in danger of becoming something like hostages in an ecclesiastical stand-off.

Initiatory rites are primarily (although not exclusively) focused on the Christian development of individual disciples. The need of these persons to get on with things in their walk with God ought not to be put on hold while parochial and diocesan leaders work on their problems. Accordingly, when Bishop Parsons comes to Bethlehem in May, he will be celebrating initiatory rites, certainly including Confirmation. Let us remember that these are not rites implying fealty to a particular person or territory, as is the case in ordination: these rites are concerned with much more important issues of faith and life. The bishop confirms as an apostle, a representative of the Catholic Church, not as caliph of a local clan. Although I consider the issues of theology and church order now at stake in the Diocese of Pennsylvania to be very important, and pray every day for their resolution, they must take a back seat to our sacramental life. Dialog, in my view, is always more honest if undertaken in a hostage-free environment.

In this regard, I remind you that it has never been my policy to second-guess you about whom you present for Confirmation and related rites, and that policy will not change.

Because I am someone who joyfully and thankfully ordains women, and is a member of the national commission charged with producing a plan for the creation of a new prayer book, and so on, I know that my actions may seem strange to some of you. I know that among my fellow bishops there will be some who will take vigorous exception to what I am doing, and others who will dismiss it as quixotic or myopic. I do not ask that anyone agree with me, but I do ask that you as colleagues, sisters and brothers, believe that this policy is the expression of my deepest convictions about the primary importance of the sacramental mysteries of which the Church is steward, and of my pastoral concern for those who desire the blessings of Confirmation but cannot receive it for reasons outside of their control.

If you have serious concerns about any of what I have written, it is my request that you call or visit me for direct conversation rather than initiate protracted correspondence. I am also open to discussing this at our monthly Bible studies. In addition, you may, as I have said before, call me at home about anything before 11 p.m. I crave your prayers.

This comes, as always, with my respect and blessing.

Faithfully,

+Paul, Bishop

April 9, 1999

CC: Bishops in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Bishops Parsons and Ackerman of Quincy
The Primate
Other clergy concerned